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SUBJECT: SPOTLIGHT ON RAHUL GANDHI AFTER 2009 ELECTION

REF: A. NEW DELHI 1072  
[1](#)B. NEW DELHI 1226

[1](#)1. (SBU) The 2009 Indian parliamentary election was largely seen as a "coming-of-age" for 39-year old Congress Party General Secretary, Rahul Gandhi. Throughout the campaign, media cast a spotlight on Rahul's every move -- from visiting almost every state to address public rallies, to gambling on Congress's "going it alone" in the Hindi heartland, to fielding a select group of youngsters for political office. As played in the media, Rahul and his cohort of fresh-faced MPs represented the future of Indian politics, embodying the "hopes and aspirations" of a very young India where 65 percent of the population is under the age of 35. Amid the clamor and excitement surrounding Rahul's rapid rise, many expected him to seek a more prominent position as a Cabinet Minister in the new government. Instead, Rahul chose to continue party building efforts, with a particular focus in reviving Congress youth wings nationwide. While his work will enhance transparency and professionalism in the party, it will also create a coterie of political loyalists to support Rahul as prime minister in the near future. End Summary.

2009: The Son Also Rises  
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[1](#)2. (U) Rahul Gandhi, Congress Party General Secretary and scion of India's most famous political dynasty, emerged from 2009 elections a political star. He was the Congress Party's lead campaigner on the election trail -- logging in over 54,000 miles, visiting almost every state and addressing more public rallies than other Congress bigwigs including his mother and Congress President, Sonia Gandhi. Rahul's strategy to "go it alone" in states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar has been credited by analysts as one of the factors that contributed to the Congress' election sweep (Ref. A). Moreover, he focused attention to injecting new blood into Congress, India's 124-year old "grand old party." In the run-up to elections, Rahul set out to democratize the functioning of the party's youth wings, the Indian Youth Congress (IYC) and the National Students Union of India (NSUI), and to project new leaders under the age of 40 into mainstream politics. His efforts helped the party attain considerable success in the 2009 elections, with media reporting widely that 75 candidates out of the 125

constituencies where Rahul campaigned won Lok Sabha seats.

Long Time Coming

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¶3. (U) Political analysts have long been anticipating Rahul Gandhi's emergence on the Indian political scene. In 2004, Rahul's Lok Sabha win from the Amethi constituency in Uttar Pradesh generated buzz among the political chattering classes, many of whom regarded his sister Priyanka as being the more charismatic and likely to succeed. Many believed that Rahul, the son of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, would reinvigorate the aging Congress Party's political fortunes among India's youth, where 65 percent of its 1.15 billion total population are under the age of 35 (Ref. B). Mid-way through his first term in office, Rahul's public image began to take shape as the media portrayed him as a "unifier" who condemned those Indian politicians who mined up caste and religious tensions for political gain.

¶4. (SBU) In 2007, Rahul stepped into the national spotlight as a Congress head campaigner for the state assembly election in Uttar Pradesh (UP), India's largest state. Despite Rahul's efforts to revive Congress units in UP, the party suffered a crippling loss to the caste-based Bahujan Samaj Party winning only 22 out of 402 seats. In the aftermath of the state elections, Rahul faced mounting criticism with political opposition and local media characterizing him as a dilettante who was not "ready" for prime time politics. An influential group of Congress veterans, however, maintained

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the UP election was a "formative" experience that has better prepared Rahul to take a more active role in the organization. In September 2007, at the age of 37, he was appointed General Secretary in charge of Congress youth wings the IYC and NSUI, further fueling wide-spread speculation that Sonia Gandhi was grooming her son for the prime minister's seat.

Re-inventing India's Grand Old Party

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¶5. (SBU) The Indian National Congress has run India's government for most of the years since 1947, with Rahul's father, grandmother and great-grandfather all serving as prime ministers. To rejuvenate the left-leaning party ahead, he set a goal that 30 percent of parliamentary candidates for 2009 elections should be 40-years old or younger. Over a year before polls, Rahul and his Youth Congress cohorts launched the "talent show" initiative to identify up-and-coming leaders. In the process, the team short-listed and interviewed 18 to 40-year old candidates for Youth Congress or NSUI leadership positions. Youth Congress President, Ashok Tanwar, told us that the objective was to give young leaders a platform to "unleash their energy in the political, economic and social sectors." Tanwar claimed that Rahul puts in eight-nine hours a day specifically for Congress youth programs, sometimes working till the early morning hours.

¶6. (SBU) Youth Congress national spokesperson, Pardeep Kumar, claimed that the talent show initiative has helped the party attain considerable success during the 2009 election, in which eight out of ten candidates fielded by Rahul won seats. The party's efforts were largely focused on the Punjab, where two out of three Punjab Youth Congress (PYC) candidates won seats: former PYC President Vijay Inder Singla, 36, from Sangrur; and current PYC President Ravneet Singh Bittu, from Anandpur Sahib. Punjab was also the testing ground for electing PYC President and Vice President, positions which were previously appointed by Congress leaders in Delhi. Tamil Nadu and Gujarat, according to party contacts, are next on Rahul's agenda using the PYC model. Earlier this year, the Youth Congress launched a month-long membership drive in Gujarat where organizational polls to the

youth wing are currently under way, and Tamil Nadu is next. Rahul also plans to start touring these states later this year-the beginning of a campaign that will gain in intensity and culminate in 2011 in Tamil Nadu and 2012 in Gujarat when these two states go to polls. Pardeep projects that a "silent revolution" would become more visible in two-three years when young faces will be the forefront of a "totally new organization."

Team Rahul

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17. (SBU) Rahul's transition from privileged scion to key political player has been practically aided and abetted by his trusted team - a judicious mix of experienced Congress hands and young professionals. Rahul's closest aide and "Man Friday" is Kanishka Singh, known as "K," who is the son of former Foreign Secretary and current Governor of Rajasthan, S.K. Singh. "K" has a MBA from Wharton School of Business worked as a Wall Street banker and World Bank analyst before joining Rahul's team in 2005. "K" was instrumental in focusing Rahul's campaign on generational change and infusing new energy into Congress base organizations. What followed was the clarion call for "internal democracy" in youth organizations, contacts indicated. Jyotiraditya Singh, AICC secretary and newly appointed Minister of State for Commerce and Industry, was assigned with the task of implementing Rahul's commitment to elections in Youth Congress state units. Another key aide is Meenakshi Natarajan, who, armed with a M.A. in Biochemistry and a law degree, led NSUI elections nationwide. Ashok Tanwar, IYC President and first-time MP from Sirsa, Haryana, oversaw Youth Congress

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organizational changes nationwide.

Comment: Trial Run for Rahul

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18. (SBU) In 2009 elections, the Congress Party had the obvious edge attracting youth in Rahul Gandhi, the 39-year old heir apparent to the Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty who emerged as a youth vote-catcher in recent months. Analysts see Rahul's rapid rise, backed by a group of young leaders, as a Congress message that there is no dearth of dynamic younger leaders in the party-that it has more aces in its pocket than the opposition. For others, it is a sign that Congress is preparing for Rahul's eventual accession to the prime ministership; his father and grandmother were prime ministers, his grandfather was India's first Prime Minister and, for many, Rahul's rise to prime minister is imminent and destined. End Comment.

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